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ABSTRACT

Research published in the 1970's indicated that young children expressed extremely traditional attitudes regarding appropriate sex-role behavior. Middle-class children (N=47) between the ages of four and eight were interviewed about their sex-role attitudes in order to determine the extent to which recently changing cultural mores have influenced children's sex-role concepts. Parents provided demographic information. Compared to children in other recent studies, these children expressed very nonstereotypic attitudes toward occupations and activities, but aspired to very traditional careers for themselves. Girls who felt it was appropriate for either men or women to be doctors or nurses, listed "nurse" as their occupational choice and "doctor" as the career they would choose if they were boys. The children often gave stereotypic reasons for preferring their own sex, with boys being more likely to give a sex-role related reason. Parents' education, mothers' employment status, and the child's gender predicted responses to several of the sex-role related questions. (Author/NRB)

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Changes and Contradictions in Children's Sex-Role Concepts

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Changes and Contradictions In Children's Sex-Role Concepts

Research on children's sex-role acquisition has been based on the assumption that the development of sex-typed preferences and awareness is a necessary and inevitable process. However, during the past decade sex-role attitudes and expectations have changed dramatically in our society, particularly among college-educated men and women (Zuckerman, in press). Since traditional sex-roles are being questioned by adults, one would expect that children's sex-role concepts and attitudes will also change.

Research published in the 1970's indicated that young children expressed extremely traditional attitudes regarding appropriate sex-role behavior. The purpose of the present study is to replicate, update, and expand upon previous research, by evaluating a sample of children who were born since the rebirth of the feminist movement, using a variety of sex-role related questions. Middle-class children between the ages of 4-8 were selected because previous studies have demonstrated that these children are aware of cultural sex-role expectations and able to articulate their views.

Method

Sample

Consent forms and demographic questionnaires were distributed to the parents of 60 children participating in a summer day camp program in 1978. These children represented all campers who were to be enrolled in kindergarten, first, or second grade the following September. Forty-nine (82%) of the children returned consent forms signed by their parents; two were not interviewed due to absence from camp.

Twenty of the children are male and 27 are female. The mean age is six years old. Most of the children live in middle-class suburbs of New Haven, Connecticut; 60% of the mothers and 64% of the fathers have college degrees.

Demographic Data

The parents provided information regarding the child's age, grade, birth order, and the parents' educational levels and occupations. Mothers' occupations were coded two ways: 1) whether or not the mother was employed outside the home and 2) whether the mother's employment was in a female-dominated field (at least two-thirds of those employed in the field are women) or in a nontraditional field (less than two-thirds of those employed are women). Fathers' occupations were coded as traditional (male-dominated) or nontraditional. Coding criteria were based on recent work force statistics.

Interviews

Each child was individually interviewed for approximately five minutes. The first part of the interview consisted of questions regarding what the children wanted to be when they were "grown up", the careers that they would choose if they were the opposite sex, and their feelings about being male or female. These questions were included as measures of sex-role attitudes. Career choices were coded as traditional or nontraditional, using the same criteria as for their parents' occupations. The careers that the children would choose if they were the opposite sex were coded three ways: 1) whether or not the child answered the question, 2) whether the career field was traditional or nontraditional, and 3) whether or not the career was identical to or related to their own career choices (e.g. nurse and doctor).

The children were also asked whether they liked being a boy/girl, and why. Virtually all the children preferred their own sex, so this question

was coded in terms of whether or not the reason reflected traditional sex-role differences.

The second part of the interview consisted of a list of 14 careers and activities that most children and adults in a recent study judged to be appropriate for only one sex, rather than either sex (Shepherd & Hess, 1975). The traditional male items included: be a soldier, fly a plane, put out fires, go fishing, be a doctor, be President of the United States, fix a car, and drive a truck. The traditional female items included: wash the dishes, sew, do the laundry, cook dinner, take care of young children, and be a nurse. For each item, the child was asked whether it was "alright for a man to do it" and "alright for a woman to do it." The children never selected the nonstereotypic sex exclusively (e.g. alright for a woman to be a soldier but not for a man), so the items were scored in terms of whether the child gave a nonstereotypic response (i.e. appropriate for either a man or woman), or a stereotypic response. The number of stereotypic responses given by each child was calculated for the traditional male items, the traditional female items, and the total score.

Results

Stereotype Scores

Twelve of the 14 items were considered appropriate for either men or women by the majority of the children. The two exceptions are "soldier" and "nurse"; 51% of the children gave stereotypic responses to these two careers. On the average, 33% of the traditional male items and 23% of the traditional female items were judged to be appropriate for only one sex. These responses are much less stereotypic than the responses of kindergarten children in the Shepherd and Hess study (1975) or than would be expected from the proportion

of men and women actually working in these careers (see Table 1). The children's total stereotype scores range from zero to the maximum possible score (14). The median and mean score is 4.

Insert Table 1 about here

Career Choices

In contrast, the children's own career choices are very stereotypic. In response to the question concerning future goals, 83% of the boys and 68% of the girls chose careers in traditional fields. For the girls, nurse (52%) and teacher (16%) are the most popular choices. For the boys, athlete (22%), fireman (17%), and police officer (17%) are the most popular. When they were asked what career they would choose if they were the opposite sex, 62% of the boys and 82% of the girls chose traditional careers. The most popular "opposite sex" choice for the girls was doctor (54%) and the most popular "opposite sex" choice for the boys was nurse (46%). Traditional/nontraditional career choices or opposite sex career choices are not correlated with one another or with stereotype scores. Forty-three per cent of the children listed careers in related fields for their own choice and opposite sex choice. None of the girls reported identical careers for their own choice and opposite sex career choice, whereas two boys listed virtually identical careers in response to these two questions: one boy listed "pilot" and "lady pilot" for his two choices, and one boy listed "baseball player" and "softball player". Several children (18%) were uncomfortable with the question regarding opposite sex career choice, and refused to answer.

Gender Preference

Forty-one per cent of the children gave a sex-role related reason for liking being a boy or girl. The most popular responses for the boys was the

enjoyment of boys' games, particularly sports (31%), whereas the girls tended to respond in a vague or uncertain way. The most popular girls' sex-role related response was the preference for wearing girls' clothes, which was mentioned by only two girls. Giving a sex-role related reason for liking being a boy or girl was not significantly correlated with stereotype scores or career choices.

Demographic Predictors of Sex-Role Responses

Stepwise multiple regressions evaluated the extent to which age, grade, sex, birth order, number of siblings, and parents' educational levels and occupations predict the sex-role related variables (stereotype scores, career choices, sex-role related reasons for preferring his/her own gender).

Stereotypic responses to the eight "male items" is significantly predicted by fathers' lower educational attainment, and is unrelated to the other background variables. In contrast, mothers' educational level and employment status predict responses to the six "female items": children with highly educated mothers or homemaker mothers tend to express less stereotypic attitudes. In the regression for the total stereotype score, fathers' education is the only significant predictor, accounting for 13% of the variance. The regression statistics are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Traditional/nontraditional career goals are not significantly predicted by any of the background variables. However, refusing to answer the question regarding opposite sex career choice is significantly predicted by sex and mothers' employment status. Almost all (83%) of the children who refused to answer this question are boys, and all have mothers who are full-time homemakers; these two variables account for 32% of the variance ($F=9.18$, $p<.0005$).

Sex is the only demographic variable that significantly predicts whether the children give sex-role related responses to the question regarding why they like being a boy or girl. Boys are more likely to give a sex-role related reason ($F=5.78$, $p<.025$; $r^2=.11$).

Birth order, number of siblings, and parents' nontraditional careers are unrelated to any sex-role responses.

Conclusions

The children's responses reflect a surprisingly nonstereotypic view of activities and occupations that have generated very stereotypic responses in recent years. In dramatic contrast, the children report extremely traditional career choices, and apparently assume that these goals would automatically change if they were the opposite sex. For some children, responses to the stereotype items directly conflict with career choice responses. For example, four girls who stated that it is appropriate for either men or women to be doctors or nurses, listed nurse as their occupational choice and doctor as the career they would choose if they were boys.

The boys' and girls' expressed preference for their own gender is consistent with Kohlberg's theories (Kohlberg, 1966) and with previous research (Zalk & Katz, 1978). However, the boys in our study were more likely to give sex-role related reasons for their preference. In contrast, the girls were unable to think of specific reasons for their preference, and tended to give vague explanations such as "girls are better than boys." The responses give the impression that the boys' allegiance to their own gender is based on a more salient preference for or pride in their traditional sex-role, compared to the girls'.

Overall, the data suggest that children's sex-role attitudes are

changing, reflecting the changes in society. The pattern that emerges is that parents' education, which is probably related to parents' sex-role attitudes and sex-role behaviors, strongly influences the extent to which their children embrace these liberal attitudes. Mothers' homemaker status does not increase children's occupational stereotyping; in fact, children with homemaker mothers tend to have more liberal attitudes towards men's participation in traditional female activities. Nevertheless, almost all of the children report traditional career expectations, regardless of parents' educational levels or occupations. Most of the children have apparently learned that it is appropriate for men and women to work in the same occupations and to participate in similar household chores, but they have apparently also learned that some careers and activities are more appropriate for one sex than the other. Moreover, the boys, especially those with homemaker mothers, have a more positive attitude toward their gender than the girls.

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Table 1

Children's Attitudes Towards Occupational Sex-Roles

Occupation/Activity	Percentage of Stereotypic Responses		Work Force
	Current Study	Shepherd & Hess Study	Women in Field
1. Be a soldier	51%	100%	7%
2. Be a nurse	51%	95%	98%
3. Sew	47%	93%	*
4. Put out fires	41%	95%	1%
5. Fix a car	40%	95%	3%
6. Be President of U.S.	30%	100%	0%
7. Drive a truck	28%	85%	2%
8. Fly an airplane	26%	95%	1%
9. Go fishing	23%	68%	*
10. Do the laundry	17%	85%	*
11. Be a doctor	13%	85%	10%
12. Cook dinner	13%	80%	*
13. Wash dishes	11%	85%	*
14. Take care of young children	6%	52%	*

These statistics are based on the responses for kindergarteners in the Shepherd and Hess study (1975).

*Comparable statistics are not available for these activities.

Table 2

Demographic Variables That Predict Children's Occupational Stereotypes

Source	df	F	p	Variance
Total Stereotype Scores				
Fathers' Education	1,41	5.97	.025	13%
Traditional Male Items				
Fathers' Education	1,41	5.33	.05	12%
Traditional Female Items				
Mothers' Education	2,40	9.07	.005	22%
Mothers' Homemaker Status		4.97	.05	